

May 25, 2005 - Remarks on Defense Authorization

Rule for H.R. 1815, National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2006

Madam Speaker, we find ourselves here today debating the rule for next year's Defense authorization bill. But while we should be discussing ways to better support our hardworking men and women in uniform, we find ourselves revisiting a debate I had assumed we settled years ago. Buried within H.R. 1815 is section 574, a provision that would severely limit the participation of women in our military. To say that I am disappointed would be an understatement of enormous proportions.

Some will say that section 574 merely codifies existing military policy; but if this provision is passed, we will be sending an entirely different message, not just to the brave women currently serving our Nation throughout the world but to those who have made the ultimate sacrifice, those who have been wounded or even killed. We will be telling them and indeed their families, We have seen you at work defending freedom and liberty here at home and abroad and you aren't good enough. I cannot think of a more disgusting message to be sending our troops, especially in a time of war.

This year, the Subcommittee on Military Personnel has not held hearings, commissioned studies, or released reports on this important issue. In fact, we have not seen a shred of evidence that a problem even exists with the integration of women in the Armed Forces. Yet the religious right wing in this country, against the advice of our military leaders, has once again decided to bend the process of government to their political will and force this issue upon America without research, without fact, without debate, and without the benefit of the democratic process.

We are in the middle of a war, in Iraq and on terror. Now is not the time to be telling more than 20,000 women that we do not value their service, especially when you consider that we are having serious problems meeting our recruitment goals. What woman is going to join a military that treats them as if they are second-class citizens not worthy of respect and dignity? Last night in the Rules Committee we watched as the coalition of members who stand rightly beside our women in uniform were slapped down on a party-line vote by the majority in their attempts to approve the Skelton-Snyder amendment which would remove this ill-conceived provision from the bill. The Secretary of the Army and the Army Vice Chief of Staff wrote the Armed Services Committee voicing their strong opposition to this provision.

Likewise, we can have no real discussion on the future of America's defense without talking about the base realignment and closure process. I share the concern of many experts and many of my colleagues across the political spectrum when I say that we are a Nation at war. Now is not the time to be closing America's military bases.

Many experts are also concerned that we are over-consolidating our resources in too few locations, especially when the greatest threat to our security comes not from a massive invasion but from a sneak attack by a terrorist organization on a target of opportunity. Did we not learn after Pearl Harbor not to put everything in one place? Does it not make more sense to have our resources strategically placed across the country? Moreover, as record numbers of Guard and Reserve troops are dying in combat defending this country, the Defense Secretary's proposed BRAC list would ground a third of the Nation's Air National Guard and Reserve units and shutter hundreds of other armories and readiness centers across the country.

Many local leaders and homeland security specialists, including the National Guard Association of the United States, has said that the consolidation would hamper State responses to local emergencies and domestic terrorist threats.

Unfortunately, the DOD did not adequately take into account a military installation's value to homeland security when developing their criteria. For example, the Niagara Falls Air Reserve Station has been recommended for closure despite the fact that it is the closest base to three major United States cities and the two largest cities in Canada. The Guard and Reserves who train there assist the Department of Homeland Security in interrogating suspicious individuals detained at the northern border. Yet the Air Force proposes to reduce the Air Mobility Command by 54 percent in the Northeast, incapacitating homeland defense in a region which comprises 20 percent of the entire United States population. I understand this is also a problem for other major cities and population centers around the country.

That is why I offered an amendment last night that would have required the commission to evaluate bases for their homeland security value, but unfortunately it was voted down.

All of us know that recruitment is another major issue that we are facing today. We have a recruitment crisis in America and an Armed Forces already stretched way too thin. But the DOD wants to close bases that regularly exceed their recruitment goals for the Guard and military

reserves, like Niagara Falls. We do not know what will happen to the large Guard and Reserve units who serve at bases recommended for closure. We know exactly where their equipment is headed, but even the Pentagon admits it does not know what is going to happen to our most valuable assets, and those are the people stationed at the bases.

But perhaps what is most troubling about the BRAC list that was submitted to the commission is that according to an Air Force BRAC spokesman, the extensive criteria used to evaluate the strategic military value of each base was not even adhered to by the Pentagon when compiling their closure list.

Instead, they used a collective judgment. I do not even know what "collective judgment" is supposed to mean, but I know that in Niagara, thousands of people are losing their jobs and are at risk at a base that is highly ranked in performing its duties, and one that has always been evaluated highly that is on the chopping block. This is unacceptable to me, and it should be unacceptable to this body.

This BRAC constitutes a complete reorganization of our military resources during a time of war with very little thought, doing untold damage to the National Guard and military Reserves, and does not consider the homeland security role.

But there are a lot of concerns about the Pentagon that we have that we will not talk about today because we did not get enough amendments approved.